

WASHINGTON — In a rare rally asking for taxation, online poker supporters gathered outside the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday. Stirred by a federal crackdown on Internet poker, they want the government to instead regulate and tax it.

"Ease the Debt, Let Us Bet," said a placard carried by one of about 50-75 participants in the rally organized by the Poker Players Alliance, an advocacy group based here.

Attendees sported red T-shirts lettered with, "Poker is not a crime." Among them was John Luisana, 31, of Lewes, Del., who said he makes his living playing online poker. He brought his 16-month old son, Max, whose T-shirt was lettered with another message.

"Legalize poker so I can have a college fund," the toddler's blue jersey said.

Last month, the U.S. Attorney's office in Manhattan, N.Y., indicted 11 founders and executives of the three largest Internet poker firms doing business in the United States: PokerStars, Full Tilt Poker and Absolute Poker.

Charges included bank fraud, money laundering and illegal gambling. Five Internet domain names used by the companies were seized. Restraining orders were issued against about 75 bank accounts allegedly used by the firms and their payment processors. The indictments seek at least \$3 billion in civil money laundering penalties and forfeitures.

The indictments were made under the 2006 federal Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act, which prohibits firms from knowingly accepting U.S. payments in connection with unlawful Internet gambling.

Alfonse D'Amato, formerly a Republican U.S. Senator from New York, is chairman of the Poker Players Alliance.

"I don't think the Congress of the United States should be prohibiting people from playing poker in their own home," D'Amato said before the rally. "By making it a crime for the financial institutions to carry out the transactions, they have essentially said, 'We're coming into your home because we've determined that you should not be playing poker on the Internet.' "

After the indictments in New York, federal prosecutors reached agreements with the three firms to allow them to use their sites to refund money players have in their accounts. That remains a work in progress.

Shawn Vance, 38, of Washington, D.C., came to the rally with his mother, Gloria Wolcott, 64, of Vancouver, Wash. Both are poker buffs. The son plays online. He said he is still waiting to get back about \$2,000 he has in an account with Full Tilt. "Full Tilt is still going through the process now. ... They say they're going to get it back to us, but I'm waiting right now," he said.

Rally speakers included U.S. Rep. Joe Barton (R-Texas), and **U.S. Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.)**

Barton has a bill in the works to regulate and tax online poker. "We're hoping we'll have some good legislative news for you folks later this session of Congress," he told the rally.

**Campbell** has co-sponsored a House bill to regulate and tax Internet gaming. Introduced in March, it includes safeguards aimed at preventing minors from using the sites.

**"You can try to make it illegal, but tens of millions of Americans want to do it, are doing it, are gonna do it," Campbell** told the rally.

**Campbell** said he doesn't play poker.

**"First of all to me, it's about freedom. And second of all, it's about jobs,"** he said. " ... **This is a big industry here, folks. And if we put the consumer protections and everything**

**we're talking about (into law) ... it won't be Americans playing on foreign sites. It will be foreigners playing on American sites."**

**Two prominent poker players also addressed the rally.**

Greg Raymer won the Main Event at the 2004 World Series of Poker. He won his \$10,000 seat in the event by winning a \$160 online tournament. His Main Event title brought a prize of \$5 million.

"There's over 10 million people (in the USA) that are known to have online poker accounts. There's estimated to be 50 million people in this country, adults, who at least play poker a little bit," Raymer said. "So most Americans are on our side. ... We have to be active and make sure that message gets to our representatives in the U.S. Congress and in the state legislatures."

On World Poker Tour telecasts, Linda Johnson has been dubbed "The First Lady of Poker." At the 1997 World Series, she won a championship bracelet in the seven-card razz event.

"I don't understand why I don't have the same rights that people in other countries have," Johnson said. " ... I've spent 35 years of my life perfecting my poker skills. Being able to play online poker gives me a lot of choices that I don't have in regular brick and mortar (casinos)."

Monday in Baltimore, a federal grand jury returned indictments charging two gambling businesses (based in Canada and Cyprus) and three defendants with conducting illegal gambling money laundering. Eleven bank accounts, located in North Carolina, Guam, Panama, Malta, Portugal and the Netherlands were seized. Domain names of 10 Internet gambling sites were seized.

John Pappas, executive director of the Poker Players Alliance, said the sites involved in the indictments were primarily sports betting sites but included two poker sites.

"I think this is going to be like a big-government game of Whac-A-Mole," Pappas said. "They're going to take down two sites here and two sites there, but three more sites are going to pop up. So until we have some kind of legislative clarity, I think we're going to have a really hard time."